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Developmental and Educational Psychology  
**Organisation:** Mary Immaculate College, Limerick  
**Study Visit:** Linking Activities - Strategies for Quality Development in General Education, 21-26  
April, 2013, Stuttgart, Germany



I am currently employed as a lecturer in Psychology of Education at *Mary Immaculate College*, Limerick. My main role involves lecturing under-graduate and post-graduate students in the areas of Developmental and Educational Psychology. I am also engaged in psychological

research and professional development with teachers in a number of primary and post-primary schools. Previously, I worked as a teacher at primary school level and am a qualified Educational Psychologist.

I chose the study visit entitled, '*Linking Activities - Strategies for Quality Development in General Education*' in Stuttgart, Germany, for a number of reasons. As an educationalist, I value the role of whole-school planning and internal/external evaluation in promoting growth and development within every school community. I felt this visit would allow me to learn about European practices in educational quality assurance and share such experiences with trainee and practicing teachers in Ireland. As an Educational Psychologist, I am also aware of the power of standardised tools and assessment in education. In particular, I value the way in which assessment results can be used to inform the teaching/learning process. I was curious to discover the way in which standardised tests are used in other European countries and sought to use this knowledge to draw comparisons with Irish practices. Finally, my interest for this visit was underpinned by recent documents published by the Department of Education and Skills. In particular, these include *Literacy and Numeracy for Learning and Life* (DES, 2011) and *School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Primary Schools/Post-Primary Schools* (DES, 2012). Prior to departing for Stuttgart, Germany, I studied these documents in detail, alongside recent conference papers from the DES Inspectorate, and also collaborated with related Irish professionals in the field. My aim for the visit was to learn about best-practice in education from our European counterparts, whilst reflecting on the strengths and limitations of quality assurance practices in our Irish education system.

The study visit took place over a five day period (21-26 April, 2013) in the *State Institute for Educational Development*, Stuttgart, Germany. The *State Institute for Educational Development* is the authority responsible for quality development and curriculum work for schools within the state of Baden-Württemberg, South-West Germany. The institute designs instruments and assessments for quality assurance and supports the region's schools in quality development. Fifteen educationalists from an array of European countries convened in Stuttgart to learn about quality assurance mechanisms in the Baden-Württemberg region of Germany and to share related practices of their home countries. The main focus of the visit was on collaborative up-skilling, information exchange and network-building, both within the Baden-Württemberg region and across Europe in general.



The programme was extremely well organised through a pre-planned weekly schedule. Each day consisted of a variety of activities including lecture-based sessions, poster-presentations, collaborative workshops and educational excursions. Topics of the week included standards for education, procedures of school development in South-West Germany, the role of internal and external evaluation in helping schools optimise their work, use of standardised comparative testing in schools and instruction development, the link between evaluation and quality of instruction, transitions from school to vocational education, and the establishment of regional educational networks and partnerships.

The first two days focused predominantly on methods of school development in Baden-Württemberg, Germany. In particular, participants learned about standardised school tests within the region, and had the opportunity to gain practical experience of working with, and interpreting, comparative tests. Day three focused specifically on internal evaluation in schools, whereby participants were provided with the theoretical background to, and aims of, the region's practices, whilst exploring related instruments for school use. That afternoon consisted of an off-campus visit to a general education institution, whereby participants met with head teachers, mainstream teachers and pupils, and learned about instruction development and internal evaluation in situ. The fourth day concentrated exclusively on external school evaluation within the Baden-Württemberg region. Hereby, participants met with inspectors, directors of education, head teachers and pupils, and engaged in the practice of external school evaluation within a local 'Gymnasium' school. Activities included observing lessons, interviewing professionals, meeting pupils and engaging in collaborative reporting of the evaluative findings. On the final day, participants travelled to Ludwigsburg, a nearby town, and host to an extensive regional educational network. There, participants met with key stakeholders within the district who seek to connect educational institutions and partners within 24 cities and districts across Baden-Württemberg. This visit exposed participants to means of establishing educational networks. Moreover, the main foci of the Ludwigsburg network were outlined, including school transition programmes, cooperation between school/youth-welfare service centres and regional data-based education reporting.

In addition to learning about educational practices within Baden-Württemberg, each European participant was also required to prepare a poster presentation for the visit related to quality assurance within his/her home country's education system. Throughout the week, each participant presented the key philosophy and practices of their country in information-sharing fora. This task ensured that information exchange and dialogue was extended beyond the German education system to that of Europe in general. It also allowed participants to draw comparisons across different systems of practice and reflect on the strengths and limitations of each country's education system.

Finally, the study visit comprised a number of cultural events including a guided city tour of Stuttgart and Marbach and a visit to a Baroque castle in Ludwigsburg. This aspect of the trip ensured that all participants gained a cultural insight into the Baden-Württemberg region, whilst concurrently, facilitated informal networking and collaboration amongst participants.

Overall, I found the study visit to be highly beneficial and informative. In particular, the visit offered me the opportunity to compare models of education and quality assurance across European education systems. Many similarities and differences were identified over the course of the week which allowed me to reflect on examples of high-quality practice, both within the Irish education system and across Europe.

The role of internal and external evaluation was a topic that evoked much discussion and dialogue during the week. The function of external evaluation was challenged throughout the visit, varying from one of control and regulation to that of a supportive role in assisting school improvement. The publication of assessment findings was also questioned in light of the 'league-table' debate, with a particular focus on its drawbacks in the English education system. The role of evaluative feedback and follow-up with schools was also debated, whereby many countries recognised the need for more intensive action with underperforming schools. Ireland's response to such schools, through the work of the DES Inspectorate, was noted as a particular strength in this regard.

School self-evaluation was also a central topic of the visit, and noted as core practice in education across Europe. All participating countries highlighted the role of *leadership and management* and *teaching and learning practices* as cornerstones for quality development within education. The role of the community in supporting school improvement was also noted and reflected positively with its focus in the recent DES (2012) publications, *School Self-Evaluation: Guidelines for Primary Schools/Post-Primary Schools*. In particular, the value of linking internal and external evaluation within school systems was highlighted, particularly in the Baden-Württemberg region, whereby inspectors support schools in self-improvement and target-setting. A notable framework for facilitating such practice is the '*Plan-Do-Act-Check-cycle*', which underpins practice in a host of European countries (e.g. Finland, Slovenia). In particular, most participants noted the value of reflective practice in education and the need for schools to develop this critical skill across pupils and practitioners. In addition, the Finnish education system was explored over the course of the visit, in light of the exceptional high attainment of Finnish students in recent PISA assessments. The flexibility and diversity with the Finnish education system, its emphasis on broad knowledge, and the culture of professional trust within education were highlighted as key features in this regard

(Kupiainen, Hautamaki & Karjalainen, 2009). The master's degree training of Finnish teachers was also postulated as a means of facilitating high levels of autonomy within the Finnish system and compared to many systems of centralised, tight control across Europe.

With regard to assessment, I was interested to learn that the majority of European countries devise new standardised tests annually. This contrasts with Irish practices in this regard, whereby standardised tests are updated less frequently. Varying practices across Europe were also voiced in relation to the use of assessment results within education, from external reporting, school comparisons, and internal feedback. In general, participants noted the need for greater use of assessment data within schools in facilitating school self-reflection. Through this means, it was believed that data could be used more effectively to support schools in identifying key strengths and priorities for improvement in the teaching/learning process.

Having participated in the study visit, I have a greater understanding of quality assurance and development, within the Irish education system, in the Baden-Württemberg region of Germany, and across European systems in general. In light of the visit, I have gained greater knowledge and skills concerning evaluative procedures and comparative testing in education and am aware of quality practices within European education systems. This knowledge has aided me to reflect on strengths and limitations of the Irish education system and consider avenues for local and national development. The study visit will support my research and practice within the educational field and will allow me to share my experiences within my organisation. Finally, my trip to Stuttgart, Germany, provided me the opportunity of collaborating and networking with a host of colleagues and educationalists. Hereby, I have made professional links across 14 different European countries which will facilitate dissemination of information, research and cross-European collaborative practices. In light of my study visit, I would highly recommend educationalists to apply to the *Léargas Lifelong Learning Programme*. I feel this exceptional programme offers education and vocational training specialists a unique opportunity to collaborate, exchange information and learn about educational practices within a European context.

